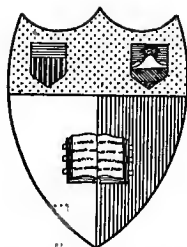


DAWN
AND OTHER
ONE-ACT PLAYS
PERCIVAL WILDE

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DAWN

WITH

THE NOBLE LORD, THE TRAITOR,
A HOUSE OF CARDS, PLAYING
WITH FIRE, THE FINGER OF GOD

One-Act Plays of Life To-day

BY

PERCIVAL WILDE



NEW YORK

HENRY HOLT AND COMPANY

1915

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THE QUINN & BODEN CO. PRESS
RAHWAY, N. J.

To
MY MOTHER

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, whose story, "How It Happened," suggested an ending for "Dawn."

To The John Adams Thayer Corporation, for permission to reprint material.

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DAWN
A DRAMA

CHARACTERS

THE DOCTOR.
THE WOMAN.
THE MAN.
A CHILD.

PLACE

A mining district.

TIME

A Winter morning, just before dawn.

DAWN

A ROUGH shack, one storey in height. At the rear is the main door, bolted. To the left of the door, a window, through which falling snow can be seen. Another door, at the right, leads into the sleeping room.

A stove, against the right wall, and a cupboard near it, are the principal objects of interest. There are two or three rickety chairs, and a deal table covered with a soiled red cloth. A scrap of dilapidated carpet conceals part of the floor. This, and a cheap chromo on the left wall, are the only attempts at ornamentation.

At the rise of the curtain the woman, MOLLY, is discovered, sitting at the window. There is very little light outside, and she has a burning kerosene lamp next to her. She is under thirty, and shabbily dressed. Suddenly she starts, rises. There is a knock at the door.

DOCTOR
(Outside)

Let me in.

WOMAN
(With great nervousness)

Why did you come here, Doctor? I told you not to come here.

DAWN

DOCTOR

Let me in, Molly.

WOMAN

You must go away. Please go away, Doctor. . . .

DOCTOR

(Interrupting. A quiet, commanding voice)

Open the door, Molly. . . . Quick, it's cold out here.

WOMAN

(Opening the door)

I told you not to come here, Doctor.

DOCTOR

(Entering. A man of thirty-five; heavily, but well clothed)

Don't talk about that. I'm half frozen.

WOMAN

(Crossing to stove)

I'll stir up the fire a little.

DOCTOR

(Following over; warming his hands)

Thanks.

WOMAN

I asked you not to come here, Doctor. You don't know what a risk you're running. If he saw you here now, he—he might kill you.

DOCTOR

That makes it interesting.

WOMAN

I'm serious, Doctor. He was talking about you only the other night; he hates you.

DOCTOR

Yes. It's a nice husband you've got.

WOMAN

You're in danger—in real danger.

DOCTOR

I've been in danger before.

WOMAN

(Shaking her head, unable to continue. Puts her hands on his coat, weeping)

Doctor! Doctor!

DOCTOR

It's all right, Molly. It's all right. I'm not going to let him hurt you.

WOMAN

I'm not thinking of myself.

DOCTOR

I know that. But *I* am, (*Noticing her arm*)
What's this here?

WOMAN

(*Trying to pull her arm away*)

Nothing. Nothing at all.

DOCTOR

Nothing? (*Pushing up the sleeve, looking at her.*
She drops her eyes.) Nothing?

WOMAN

It's a burn.

DOCTOR

So I see. Dick has been up to his old tricks again.

WOMAN

He had a little too much to drink, Doctor.

DOCTOR

How did it happen?

WOMAN

He didn't know what he was doing.

DOCTOR

Let *me* judge, won't you? How did it happen?

WOMAN

Well, it was Tuesday night——

DOCTOR

After I had left?

WOMAN

Yes. He came in a little later. He had been drinking—and he was angry. You know, drink excites him terribly. And he told me to pull off his boots—and—and I suppose I was slow about it, so—so——

DOCTOR

So?

WOMAN

Oh, what's the use? It's over now.

DOCTOR

He took the poker, I should say, and he heated it——

WOMAN

Not very hot.

DOCTOR

As you say. He heated the poker, not *very* hot, and then he beat you with it, to make you a little quicker next time, eh?

DAWN

WOMAN

He didn't hit me hard.

DOCTOR

No. I could see that.

(Crossing to her, and roughly passing his hand along her back.)

WOMAN

Oh!

(An involuntary cry of pain.)

DOCTOR

Clever beast! Where it wouldn't show!

WOMAN

It's over now, Doctor.

DOCTOR

Yes. Then, when the poker was cold, I suppose he kicked you. Did he?

WOMAN

Yes.

DOCTOR

Where?

WOMAN

(Indicating abdomen)

Here.

DOCTOR
(*Nodding*)

Nice, thoughtful fellow—your husband.

WOMAN
(*Breaking into sobs*)

He—he doesn't want me to—to have any more children, Doctor.

DOCTOR
(*Slowly*)

Yes. (*A pause.*) Is he home? (*The WOMAN shakes her head.*) When did he go?

WOMAN
Last night.

DOCTOR
With Conolly?

WOMAN
Yes.

DOCTOR
And Holzman?

WOMAN
Yes. He had something to attend to.

DOCTOR
Something to attend to?

DAWN

WOMAN

Yes. The three of them went together.

DOCTOR

He didn't by any chance mention the Esmeralda?

WOMAN

The Esmeralda?

DOCTOR

The Esmeralda mine?

WOMAN

He said it needed fixing.

DOCTOR

I thought so.

WOMAN

Why, what do you mean, Doctor?

DOCTOR

Nothing.

WOMAN

(Alarmed)

What do you mean?

DOCTOR

Would you be very much surprised if I told you that the Esmeralda was blown up at midnight?

WOMAN

Good God!

DOCTOR

There were four men killed.

WOMAN

And Dick!

DOCTOR

Oh, Dick wasn't touched! He took precious good care of his skin!

WOMAN

Dick escaped!

DOCTOR

Escaped nothing! He was the man who blew up the mine!

WOMAN

(A long-drawn Oh! of horror.)

DOCTOR

He ran no risk. There was clockwork, and he was a mile away when it blew up.

WOMAN

But Dick, that Dick should do such a thing! I don't believe he did it, Doctor! I don't believe it! You don't think so, do you? *(The DOCTOR slowly pulls an object from his pocket.)* What's that?

DAWN

DOCTOR

That is part of a dry battery.

WOMAN

Well?

DOCTOR

The number is still on the bottom. Wainwright is pretty sure the manufacturers can identify it.

WOMAN

Wainwright?

DOCTOR

We roused him up. He thinks he sold it to Dick a week ago.

WOMAN

(Breathlessly)

Well?

DOCTOR

It's funny that I found it at the Esmeralda!

WOMAN

At the Esmeralda?

DOCTOR

(Nodding)

Just after the explosion.

WOMAN

(Breaking into sobs, and burying her face on the Doctor's lap.)

Doctor, don't tell me any more! I don't want to know! I don't want to know!

DOCTOR

(Stroking her head, and replacing battery in pocket)

It was bad enough without this, wasn't it? And you've stuck to him through it all! You women! *(Pause.)* Even after he killed Maggie?

WOMAN

Don't say that, Doctor.

DOCTOR

It wasn't legal murder—he didn't do it all at once. It took him more than a year. A child can't stand what a grown woman can. *(He pauses.)* How old was she?

WOMAN

She would have been ten this month. . . . *(The Doctor shakes his head in silent sympathy.)* She was such a pretty child. See!

(She pulls a cheap locket from her bosom, and opens it. There is a pause.)

DOCTOR

He beat her, too?

DAWN

WOMAN

Yes.

DOCTOR

With the poker? (*The WOMAN nods.*) Heated
—not *very* hot?

WOMAN

Oh, I tried to stop him, Doctor, but I couldn't do anything.

DOCTOR

I know that. (*He rises.*) And this brute, this devil, is the man you are living with!

WOMAN

Doctor!

DOCTOR

Yes, you're right. Words don't do any good.

WOMAN

He won't do it again. I'm sure.

DOCTOR

So am I!

WOMAN

What do you mean?

DOCTOR

(Wheeling abruptly)

Get your things, Molly.

WOMAN

My things!

DOCTOR

Your wraps—plenty of them—it's cold outside.

WOMAN

But I'm not going out.

DOCTOR

You're coming with me.

WOMAN

(Frightened)

Doctor!

DOCTOR

I couldn't stop him from killing Maggie, but he won't lay a hand on *you* again!

WOMAN

Doctor! I can't do it!

DOCTOR

You're not safe here.

WOMAN

Doctor! He's my husband!

DOCTOR

I don't care who he is! You're coming with me!
(*Half leads, half pulls her towards the next room, talking. The WOMAN resists feebly, exclaiming No, Doctor! No!*) I'm going to put you to bed for a week, and I'm going to make a well woman out of you. And then we'll find some work you can do—some light, easy work, and you won't know yourself——

(*A heavy thump at the door.*)

WOMAN

There's Dick! Doctor, if he finds you here . . . !

MAN

(*Outside*)

Lemme in!

DOCTOR

Dick?

WOMAN

I expected him back before this.

MAN

Open up! Come on, open up!

WOMAN

For Heaven's sake!

DOCTOR

(Quietly drawing a revolver)

Open the door.

(He goes to extreme left. The WOMAN opens the door. The MAN pushes in so suddenly that he almost upsets her.)

MAN

(Huge, uncouth, brutal)

Waitin' up fer me?

WOMAN

Yes, Dick.

MAN

Like a kin', d'voted wife, eh? *(Crossing to stove.)*
Glad ter see me, ain't ye?

WOMAN

Yes, Dick.

MAN

Ye better be. *(Flings off his coat. Sits. Sticks out his feet. She does not see.)* Well! Git a move on! *(She runs over and tries to remove his boots.)* Come on! Come on! *(A pause.)* God, you're clumsy! *(Pushing her away. Trying to remove his boots himself.)* I'll have ter learn ye—like last time. I'll learn ye, all right! I'll learn ye! *(He catches*

sight of the DOCTOR. *Springs up furiously.*) You? What are *you* doin' here? (*The DOCTOR does not answer.*) Don't stand there gapin' like a damned fool! What are ye doin' here?

DOCTOR

Looking around.

MAN

Looking around?

DOCTOR

Yes.

MAN

Well, *see* anything ye like.

DOCTOR

Thanks.

MAN

An' get out.

DOCTOR

I'm going to.

MAN

(*Impatiently*)

Well?

DOCTOR

I'm going to take Molly with me.

MAN

Yer goin' ter take Molly with ye? Oh, ho! That's rich! (*He pauses.*) In love with her?

DOCTOR

No.

MAN

Well?

DOCTOR

She doesn't belong here.

MAN

Don't belong here? Goin' ter take her with ye? Goin' ter come between man an' wife, till death do us part? An' what'll *I* be doin'?

DOCTOR

I don't care.

MAN

But *I* do. (*Throwing an arm roughly around the WOMAN's waist.*) She stays here! See?

DOCTOR

You needn't argue.

MAN

I ain't goin' ter. (*Approaching the DOCTOR.*) But I'm goin' ter give ye the damndest lickin' ye ever

had before ye get out o' here! (*Seizing poker.*) I'm goin' ter mess up that pretty face o' yer fer ye!

DOCTOR

(*Leveling revolver*)

Stop!

MAN

Eh? He's got his artillery with him!

DOCTOR

Yes. I knew where I was going.

MAN

Well, shoot an' be damned ter ye! Garn! Shoot! Shoot an unarmed man!

DOCTOR

Sit down.

MAN

Eh?

DOCTOR

Sit down.

MAN

Oh, ho! Orderin' me around in my own——

DOCTOR

(*Interrupting furiously*)

I've heard just about enough from you. Now sit down! (*Dick slouches to a chair; sits. During the*

following dialogue he slowly rocks the chair back and forth, gradually, and almost imperceptibly moving it to the extreme right, next to the cupboard.) I'm not going to call you names. There's nothing in the English language bad enough for you, and you wouldn't care what I called you. But I'm going to tell you what I'm going to do to you.

MAN

(Leaning back; drawling)

Yes?

DOCTOR

You killed your daughter.

WOMAN

(Interrupting)

Doctor!

DOCTOR

(Silencing her with a gesture)

If I'd a had my way, they'd a hung you for it! But I got here too late: I couldn't prove that she died as a result of what—of what you did to her. And we've got to give even such curs as you the benefit of the doubt.

MAN

She was always sickly.

DAWN

DOCTOR

So you helped her by beating her with a poker—
red hot.

MAN

Well, Maggie was *my* daughter.

DOCTOR

God rest her soul!

WOMAN

Amen!

DOCTOR

Your wife is sickly, too, I suppose?

MAN

Runs in the family.

DOCTOR

So you are treating her in the same way you treated
Maggie?

MAN

Is it any of *your* business how I treat her?

DOCTOR

Yes, it is.

MAN

Well, I say it isn't.

DOCTOR

(Leveling the revolver again)

And I say it is!

MAN

Oh!

DOCTOR

That is why I'm going to take Molly away with me.

MAN

(After a pause)

That all ye got to say?

DOCTOR

No, it isn't.

MAN

Well, go on. I'm listenin'.

DOCTOR

There was an explosion in the King Edward mine three months ago.

MAN

Yes?

DOCTOR

Nobody was hurt.

DAWN

MAN

Lord be praised!

DOCTOR

There was another explosion in the same mine a few weeks later. That time a dozen men were blown to pieces.

MAN

What's this? A sermon?

(By this time he has reached the cupboard; he bends slowly, and unobserved takes from it a milk bottle half full of liquid.)

DOCTOR

There were a good many more explosions after that. Then, last night——

MAN

(Watching him from the corner of his eye, and speaking casually)

Last night?

DOCTOR

The Esmeralda was blown up.

MAN

(Balancing the bottle on his knees)

Ye don't mean it!

WOMAN

You didn't have anything to do with it, Dick, did you?

(The MAN pushes her away.)

DOCTOR

Conolly has been arrested already.

MAN

Yes?

DOCTOR

His body is hanging from a tree down the road.

MAN

Without a trial?

DOCTOR

There was no time for any. Now they're after Holzman. He left town early, but they'll get him. They've telegraphed ahead. *(A pause.)* And I've got *you!*

WOMAN

Dick, Dick, say you didn't do it!

MAN

Ah, go way. What's the evidence, Doc?

DOCTOR

(Showing fragment of battery)

This.

MAN

What is it?

DOCTOR

Part of the battery you bought at Wainwright's.

MAN

Did he identify it?

DOCTOR

Not positively. He doesn't keep a record of the numbers. He's writing to the factory.

MAN

That all the evidence against me?

DOCTOR

Yes. It's a little thing, Dick, but it's enough to hang you.

MAN

The number on the bottom of the battery?

DOCTOR

Yes.

MAN

(Rising lazily)

Well, scratch it off.

DOCTOR

Eh?

MAN

Scratch it off, I said.

DOCTOR

Do you think I'm crazy?

MAN

Do you think *I'm* crazy?*(Towards center.)*

DOCTOR

(With revolver)

Stay where you are!

MAN

(Raising milk bottle)

Don't make me laugh! *(Pause.)* D'ye see this?
(Waving the bottle.) Half a quart o' nitro-glycerine!
Half a quart!

DOCTOR

What?

(Going towards him)

Dick!

(Turning on her brutally)

Keep away from me! *(Turns to DOCTOR.)* If ye shoot, I'll drop this—an' it's mighty pertikler where it lands. Or if ye don't shoot, mebbe I'll drop it anyhow. It took only this much to fix the Esmeralda.

So you *did* it!

Dick, you!

Of course. . . . *(As DOCTOR approaches.)* Go easy. I'm not lookin' fer company!

Ah, you're bluffing!

Bluffin', eh?

I've heard of that trick before! You've got water in there!

MAN

Water, eh? Well, you're a doctor—(*taking a knife from table; dipping it into bottle*)—taste it! (*He hands the knife to the DOCTOR.*) Well? (*The DOCTOR tastes; then silently puts away his revolver.*) Ah!

DOCTOR

Think of your wife, man!

MAN

Cut it! Cut it! Now, let's talk. (*Sits.*) You're a religious man, ain't ye, Doc?

DOCTOR

Yes, I am.

MAN

Go to church on Sunday?

DOCTOR

Yes.

MAN

You'd keep an oath?

DOCTOR

What do you mean?

MAN

You're going to swear to do what I want before ye get out o' here—alive.

DAWN

DOCTOR

I'll do nothing of the kind.

MAN

Then ye won't get out—alive. (*Pause.*) The number on that battery is all the evidence they've got against me. You're going to scrape that off. You're going to tell them I'm innocent—you've talked to me, an' you're sure of it. They'll believe *you*.

DOCTOR

(Quietly)

I won't do it.

MAN

Oh, there's no hurry! Think it over. (*Pause.*) If ye do, I won't touch ye—an' if ye don't ye'll be sprinkled all over the county in a minute.

WOMAN

Doctor, he means what he says. I know him. For God's sake——

DOCTOR

(Interrupting)

Do you think I'm afraid of death? If I were I wouldn't be a doctor! I ran more risk when the yellow fever broke out in Havana than I do now!

WOMAN

But, Doctor, you are young! Your life is valuable!
You don't care about him. Do what he asks!

DOCTOR

(Pushing her away)

I am not a coward.

MAN

Well, Doc, I ain't a coward any more than you.
What have ye got to say? Quick!

DOCTOR

(Rapidly)

Molly, if—if anything happens to me, you will
find that I have left you some money—enough
to take you East—to my sister. She knows about you.
She'll take care of you.

MAN

(Interrupting)

Come on! Come on!

DOCTOR

(Disregarding him)

You understand, Molly?

DAWN

WOMAN

But, Doctor——

DOCTOR

You understand?

WOMAN

Yes.

DOCTOR

(Turning to the MAN)

As for you, you think you're going to get away?

MAN

Mebbe.

DOCTOR

You won't. *(Drawing revolver.)* If it's the last thing I do, I'll shoot you. And if *I* don't get you, they'll get you outside.

MAN

(Excitedly)

What do ye mean?

DOCTOR

(Lying desperately)

I didn't come alone. I brought a dozen men with me. Look for yourself.

MAN

Where?

DOCTOR

Anywheres. Outside.

(The MAN goes toward the door, begins to open it. The DOCTOR rushes at him. The MAN, who half expects it, dodges, jumps back, raises the bottle with a snarl, and throws it as the DOCTOR fires.)

There is a terrific explosion. The lights go out, and dawn, an instant later, begins to break through a thin, pungent smoke which is rapidly drifting away on the fresh morning breeze. The rear and left walls of the shack are blown out, and the snowclad hillside is dimly visible.

The left of the stage is encumbered with débris, and a body appears to be beneath it. The right is practically untouched, and the MAN, standing there, with his hands over his eyes, is moaning in agony. The WOMAN, uninjured, but screaming hysterically, is feverishly searching the ruins. And the DOCTOR, apparently unhurt, stands at the left with a child, a child in the garments of the working class, at his side.)

DOCTOR

What a smash! What a terrific smash!

DAWN

WOMAN

(Searching)

Doctor! Doctor! Where are you?

DOCTOR

Here I am!

(The WOMAN does not appear to hear him.)

WOMAN

Where are you, Doctor? Are you hurt?

DOCTOR

No, I'm not hurt.

WOMAN

(Falling to her knees at the side of a body, with a torrent of sobs)

Doctor! Oh, Doctor!

THE CHILD

(Touching his sleeve)

Doctor!

DOCTOR

Eh? How do you come here? *(Thunderstruck, staggering back, almost fainting.)* You—who are you?

THE CHILD

(With a winsome smile)

Why, I'm Maggie.

DOCTOR

M-Maggie? But you—you are *dead!*

THE CHILD

(Smiling gently)

So are you.

THE CURTAIN FALLS SLOWLY

THE NOBLE LORD
A COMEDY

CHARACTERS

HE

SHE

PETERS

THE NOBLE LORD

A SECLUDED spot in the Maine woods in the neighborhood of a summer hotel. It is the middle of July. The trees are covered with foliage, a hot sun casts dancing shadows upon the mossy ground, and the air is full of the twittering of birds and the rustle of leaves. A winding path crosses from one side to the other, and near the center is a little clearing: the stump of a felled tree, with the lichen-covered trunk itself near it, and a patch of grassy turf. The eye cannot penetrate far through the riotously growing underbrush, but as one looks upwards, to the left, a thinning of foliage, allowing a glimpse of the sky, gives evidence of the near proximity of some small body of water.

As the curtain rises the scene is empty. There is only the song of birds, and the whisper of a gentle breeze. For a few seconds nothing else is heard. Then, suddenly, not far away, there is the sound of a splash, followed by the scream of a drowning woman, "Help! Help! Help!" There is a tremendous crashing through the underbrush, and another voice, very masculine, very English, shouts, "Where are you? Where are you?" Rather indefi-

nately the first speaker answers, "Here! Help! Help!" Another crashing through the underbrush, followed by a second splash, and presently, after a short pause, there enters upon the stage a tall, much bedraggled Englishman, bearing in his arms the motionless body of an extremely good-looking girl. Both of them are very wet, and a trail of water marks their progress across the scene. Reaching the clearing, the Englishman methodically deposits the girl on the ground, backs away a foot or so, and notices that his hands are wet. He reaches into a hip pocket and draws forth a handkerchief: the handkerchief is wetter than his hands. With a gesture of vexation he throws it away, and gives his attention to the girl. He looks at her quizzically; then, rather timidly, he kneels at her side, and lays his ear over her heart. He rises promptly with a satisfied nod, carefully removes his dripping coat, folds it neatly, and places it on the log. Again he kneels, this time with his knees on either side of the girl's head, and laboriously begins to apply the Sylvester method, counting audibly as he does so. At "ten" he stops wearily, pauses, and again applies his ear to her heart. The result is evidently pleasing, and after a few more Sylvester movements, he begins to vary the procedure by removing her shoes and alternately chafing her hands and feet. Presently she sighs deeply. For the third time he pauses to listen to her heart. Slowly and deliberately her left arm rises, to encircle his neck in a confiding clasp. He sits back on his haunches, politely surprised.

SHE

(Faintly)

Mother! Mother, dear!

HE

Eh?

SHE

Mother, dear, I'm so glad——

HE

(Interrupting energetically)

Really, I beg your pardon. . . .

SHE

(Continuing without a break)

I'm so glad you've come.

HE

Ah, yes. . . . Quite so.

SHE

Kiss me, mother.

HE

(Trying to rise)

Eh?

(She does not release him.)

SHE

Kiss me, mother.

HE

But I'm not your mother.

SHE

(Plaintively)

Won't you kiss me, mother?

HE

(Looks around furtively. Then he obliges her.)

SHE

Ah! That's so nice. *(She pauses. Shudders.)*
Hold me close, mother, hold me close. I've had such
a terrible dream!

HE

Good Heavens! You're not dreaming now. . . .

SHE

I dreamt—I dreamt—— *(He has raised her to a
sitting position. She stops abruptly. Looks about.)*
Where—where am I?

HE

(Surprised)

Don't you know?

SHE

No.

HE

(In a matter-of-fact tone)

We are about half a mile away from the Poland
Springs Hotel, Poland Springs, Maine.

SHE

(Vaguely)

Oh! *(She pauses.)* And you, how do you come here?

HE

Strolling.

SHE

Strolling?

HE

I reached the hotel this morning. It was hot—
beastly hot. I went for a walk in the woods.

SHE

And then?

HE

I beg your pardon?

SHE

What happened then? How did we meet?

HE

Don't *you* know?

SHE

I remember nothing—I'm confused. *(She tries to get up, but sits on the log with a little exclamation.)*
My shoes—where are my shoes?

HE

(Fetching them)

Here they are.

SHE

Thank you. . . . *(She looks at them.)* Those
aren't my shoes!

HE

(Politely)

No?

SHE

They're wet.

HE

(Nodding)

They would be.

SHE

But they're not mine.

HE

(Shrugging his shoulders)

I found them on your feet.

SHE

(Confused)

On my feet?

HE

Yes. . . . (*An afterthought*) One on each.

SHE

Oh! . . . (*She tries to put them on.*) I can't get them on.

HE

No?

SHE

Will you help me? (*He assists her; she feels her clothes and exclaims*): Oh!

HE

Did I hurt you?

SHE

(*Astonished*)

My clothes are wet!

HE

(*Thoughtfully*)

Yes.

SHE

How funny! (*Noticing him.*) And you—you're wet also!

HE

(Nodding)

Soaked.

SHE

What a coincidence! How curious! How did it happen? *(She pauses.)* Oh, if I could only think! Think! *(He rises, and waits politely.)* Tell me: you must know.

HE

Well, I was strolling through the woods. I heard a splash——

SHE

(Interrupting)

A splash! Oh, don't say any more: I remember! That horrible lake! Horrible! It was so warm at the hotel: I had gone off to the woods. I was sitting at the edge of the lake—on a rock—reading. I must have been sleepy. I fell in.

HE

Then you screamed.

SHE

Yes: I was drowning! Drowning! I called for help!

HE

I heard you.

SHE

I sank—I sank, oh, miles and miles! It felt as if hands were trying to pull me down to the bottom! I screamed again—and then—then—I felt a strong arm around my waist—I was dizzy—there was a roaring in my ears—I knew no more.

HE

(Sympathetically)

Too bad, too bad.

SHE

And you—*(rising to her feet enthusiastically)*—you were the man who jumped in!

HE

(Apologetically)

I was passing by.

SHE

You saved my life! Oh, how can I ever thank you? My hero!

(She throws her arms about his neck.)

HE

That's all right. . . .

SHE

But it's not all right. I can never repay you! Never! Never! Not if I live to be a thousand years old!

(She kisses him.)

HE

(Calmly)

That's the second time.

SHE

The second time?

HE

(Nodding)

I kissed you before.

SHE

Oh! *(Releasing him quickly.)* You didn't!

HE

Yes, I did.

SHE

While I was unconscious?

HE

Precisely.

SHE

Oh, how *could* you do such a thing? How *could* you?

HE

(Taking up his coat)

It was by request.

(Takes cigarette case from pocket.)

SHE

(Incredulously)

I asked you?

HE

You said, "Mother! Mother! Kiss me!"

(Takes cigarette from case. Pleased to see that it is dry. Puts it between his lips.)

SHE

I said *that*?

HE

They were your first words.

(Produces match-safe from trouser pocket.)

SHE

But you didn't have to kiss me.

HE

No?

(Trying to strike a match. It is wet. So are the others.)

SHE

You didn't have to!

HE

I tried to explain that I was not your mother, but you seemed to know better. *(He throws the cigarette away.)* You insisted. I couldn't help it.

SHE

(After a pause, coquettishly)

What do you mean: you couldn't "help it"?

HE

(Perfectly willing to flirt)

You know——

(He hesitates.)

SHE

(Encouragingly)

Yes?

HE

You're a pretty girl—a deucedly pretty girl.

SHE

Oh, no!

HE

But you are; honor bright!

SHE

You really think so?

HE

(Nods)

There was no one around. It was the kind of an opportunity which does not present itself every day: life is *so* monotonous. And you didn't seem to object.

SHE

(Coyly)

I couldn't very well—not while I was unconscious.

HE

That's so. I am a man, with a man's tastes. And you begged me so hard—it was so inviting—well, I kissed you.

SHE

(After a pause)

On the lips?

HE

Yes. On the lips.

SHE

(After a pause)

How often?

HE

Eh?

SHE

How often did you kiss me?

HE

Only once.

SHE

Was that all?

HE

(With a smile)

Why, it's hardly worth mentioning.

SHE

(Going to him and taking his hands magnanimously)

Well, I forgive you.

HE

Thank you.

SHE

(Invitingly)

Two kisses is not a great deal for saving my life.

HE

No?

SHE

I owe you much more than that!

HE

(Standing motionless)

Really?

SHE

(With her lips half an inch from his)

Really! *(A pause.)* Really! *(He does not kiss her. She gives it up. Sits on the log, drawing him to her side.)* You must tell me all about yourself. Just

think: if it hadn't been for you, I would be at the bottom of the lake now. What a horrible tragedy that would have been: to die in such a way! . . . (*She pauses.*) It's natural that I should want to know something about the man who saved me from that. . . .

HE

(*With embarrassment*)

I don't like to talk about myself——

SHE

(*Interrupting encouragingly*)

You're still a young man, aren't you?

HE

Thirty-one.

SHE

(*Laying her hand on his*)

Are you?

HE

(*Nodding*)

Last November.

SHE

(*Lying with the insouciance of expertness*)

I'm just twenty. (*He nods his head, without showing the least sign of disbelief.*) Eleven years between us.

HE

Just the right ages, aren't we?

SHE

(Leaving her hand where it is)

Do you think so?

HE

Eleven years difference—ideal!

SHE

Ten and a half.

HE

Eh?

SHE

I was born in June.

HE

Oh, were you? *(Sagely.)* That's better yet.

SHE

Do you think so—Lord Brookfield?

HE

(Surprised—or simulating it effectively.)

Eh?

SHE

Lord Brookfield?

HE

How on earth did you know it?

SHE

(With a laugh)

Oh, I am not so stupid as all that!

HE

You recognized me?

SHE

No. I have never seen you.

HE

A photo?

SHE

No.

HE

Then how did you know? . . .

SHE

(Interrupting)

Lord Brookfield is a well-known man. The papers said he was coming to the hotel. I knew every other guest——

HE

But three or four others arrived this morning.

SHE

Americans.

HE

Oh!

SHE

You are English. I could see that right away.

HE

(After a pause)

How clever of you!

SHE

Oh, Lord Brookfield!

HE

And how curious that I should meet you in this way—informal, so to speak.

SHE

(Laughing)

Odd, wasn't it? *(She rises.)* Ugh!—how my clothes are sticking to me!

HE

That's so. You had better change.

SHE

And you?

HE

I'm rather wet myself.

SHE

Will you take me back to the hotel?

HE

The sun is very hot here.

SHE

(Instantly changing)

Oh, would you rather stay?

HE

(Does not answer for a few seconds. Then, a little abruptly)

Tell me: can you swim?

SHE

(Startled)

Eh?

HE

Can you swim?

SHE

Lord Brookfield! Of course I can't!

HE

That's curious.

SHE

Curious?

HE

Neither can I.

SHE

(Staggered, but returning to the attack with magnificent self-possession)

Oh, but you swam splendidly! Clothes and all!
All the way from the other side of the lake!

HE

Did I?

SHE

Of course you did! One plunge, and a few magnificent overhand strokes. . . .

(She notices his peculiar expression, and hesitates.)

HE

(Thoughtfully)

Plunge?

SHE

Why, certainly.

HE

(Shaking his head)

I would have sworn I waded.

SHE

(Laughing uneasily)

You are really too modest, Lord Brookfield.

HE

Let's see. *(He picks up his coat, and shakes it out.)*
Of course, I might have swum, but—— Ah! the
water line comes only as far as the waist!

SHE

That means nothing.

HE

No? *(Feeling his head.)* If I had plunged, my
hair would have been wet.

SHE

It dried in the sun.

HE

Ah, yes! But my cigarettes!
(Taking one from the case.)

SHE

The case is waterproof.

HE

Still, the matches are wet. *(Producing the box
from his trouser pocket, and trying to strike one.)*
You see?

SHE

(With a forced laugh)

Lord Brookfield, don't deny that you saved my life!

HE

That is what I am trying to do.

SHE

(Frigidly)

I beg your pardon?

HE

I jumped in without thinking. It was the natural thing to do: I heard you scream for help. But the moment the water came to my waist I knew that if it went any deeper I should have to call for help also.

SHE

Well?

HE

I was spared that humiliation: the pond isn't over three feet deep in any place. And I waded the whole twenty feet from one end to the other. . . . And I *can't* swim.

SHE

But I was drowning! Drowning!

HE

(Politely)

Are you in the habit of drowning often?

SHE

(Rising indignantly)

Lord Brookfield!

HE

I nearly forgot to mention——

SHE

What?

HE

That I saw you jump in.

SHE

Oh!

HE

It was pleasant while it lasted, wasn't it? And romantic! Why, romantic doesn't begin to describe it! *(Imitating)* "Mother, kiss me!"

SHE

Oh, how can you?

HE

Unconscious—helpless—and you didn't remember! Not even the shoes. That was clever—very clever!

And the hands trying to pull you down to the bottom: that was the touch of genius! (*He pauses with a smile.*) Ah, well, I was willing to have a little fun.

(*A man is heard whistling a popular song in the distance. He listens attentively.*)

SHE

(*After a pause*)

You played with me—played with me. Oh, you're disgusting! Revolting! What a thing for a *man* to do! I thought——

(*She breaks off.*)

HE

(*Encouraging her to continue*)

Yes?

SHE

Nothing. . . . (*Then, seeing no reason to restrain herself.*) I thought Lord Brookfield was a gentleman!

HE

Oh, but *I'm* not.

SHE

Not a gentleman?

HE

No. . . . I'm not Lord Brookfield.

SHE

Not Lord Brookfield?

HE

No.

SHE

Then who on earth are you?

HE

(Sweetly)

I? I'm a friend of his.

SHE

A friend?

HE

A close friend—very close.

SHE

Who? Who?

HE

(Leisurely)

I'm not related, you know, but I see a lot of him.
We're thick—very thick.

SHE

(Impatiently)

Who are you?

HE

(Simply)

I'm his valet.

SHE

(Horrified)

Oh! . . . And you kissed me! A valet! You dared kiss me!

HE

At your request.

SHE

(Almost choking with rage)

But a valet! A valet!

HE

I'm a good valet. One of the best there is.

SHE

Your insolence! Oh!

(She seizes the handkerchief which he has left on the log, and wipes her mouth furiously.)

HE

My handkerchief.

SHE

(Throwing it to the ground)

Oh, you coward! You. . . . You——

*(She sits on the log, inarticulate with rage.**The whistle is heard again.)*

HE

Listen to me.

SHE

I won't.

HE

(Earnestly)

Listen to me.

SHE

I don't want to talk to you!

HE

I'll help you.

SHE

(Rising)

I don't want your help.

HE

(Bluntly)

Then you're silly.

SHE

(Wheeling furiously)

How dare you——

HE

(Interrupting)

I'll make a bargain with you.

SHE

(Scornfully)

What dealings can there be between us?

HE

Did you hear the whistling a minute ago?

SHE

Well?

HE

(With meaning)

That's Brookfield.

SHE

(After a pause)

Well?

HE

The path leads here. He is following the path——

SHE

(After still another pause)

Well?

HE

You and I might be very good friends——

SHE

(Thoughtfully)

Oh, you mean——

HE

A valet is not paid very well——

SHE

No. . . . Still——

HE

If anything comes of it——

SHE

(Slowly)

Comes of what?

HE

You understand me. *(He pauses; smiles. Then, in a Mephistophelian manner):* Your clothes are still wet, aren't they?

SHE

(With full comprehension)

Yes——

HE

Enough said! *(The whistle is heard, close at hand.)*
Quick!

SHE

(Going off)

You won't tell? *(He shakes his head.)* I'll remember you.

(She runs into the woods.)

HE

(Sits on the log, laughs heartily. He produces another cigarette, and tries in vain to light it. Then, as an atrocious little cockney enters whistling gaily, he addresses him sharply)

Peters!

PETERS

(Surprised)

M'lord?

HE

Give me a light, Peters.

PETERS

Yes, m'lord.

(Produces match, etc.)

HE

Thanks. (*He blows a few whiffs into the air. Then stops, and surveys PETERS thoughtfully.*) Peters, you're a brave man, aren't you?

PETERS

(Modestly)

I am 'andy with me fists, m'lord.

HE

That's not quite what I mean, Peters. . . . (*He pauses.*) Peters, you have the making of a hero in you. Something tells me that you're going to have your chance.

(There is a loud splash from the same direction as before, followed by screams of "Help! Help!")

PETERS

(With excitement)

M'lord!

HE

(Quietly)

Yes, Peters?

PETERS

Somebody's calling for 'elp, m'lord!

HE

Yes, Peters.

PETERS

Shall I go, m'lord?

HE

Yes, Peters. . . . Gallop!

And as

PETERS

(Charges wildly into the shrubbery, shouting):

H'I'm coming! H'I'm coming!

THE CURTAIN FALLS

THE TRAITOR
A DRAMA

CHARACTERS

COLONEL SIR ROBERT ANSTRUTHER, K. C. M. G.

MAJOR MACLAURIN, V. C.

CAPTAIN GRANTHAM.

CAPTAIN BATES.

CAPTAIN PARKER.

CAPTAIN WILLOUGHBY.

LIEUTENANT EDWARDS.

Other officers of the Fusiliers; an Orderly.

THE SCENE

COLONEL ANSTRUTHER'S *Tent.*

THE PLACE

South Africa.

THE TIME

The Boer War.

THE TRAITOR

***A**S the curtain rises Colonel ANSTRUTHER and Major MACLAURIN are discovered, seated on camp chairs, near a plain deal table. At intervals an orderly is seen passing the door of the tent. It is after nightfall, and a flickering light is cast by a few lamps. There is a long pause.*

MACLAURIN

(Vehemently)

It's hell, Colonel, that's what it is! It's hell!

ANSTRUTHER

(After a silence)

You haven't a suspicion?

MACLAURIN

No. . . . He's clever—too clever! Damn him!

ANSTRUTHER

There's never been anything like it in the history of the regiment.

MACLAURIN

I wouldn't believe it if you told me. I wouldn't believe it unless I knew it at first hand. That an Englishman—an Englishman——

THE TRAITOR

ANSTRUTHER

A traitor.

MACLAURIN

(Nodding bitterly)

Yes.

ANSTRUTHER

There have been traitors before.

MACLAURIN

But not in the Fusiliers!

ANSTRUTHER

Thank God, no.

MACLAURIN

The first thing that made me suspect was a month ago: at Spiesfontein: when the Boers shelled us.

ANSTRUTHER

It was queer, wasn't it?

MACLAURIN

It was much worse than queer! They knew our position! They knew our strength! There was not a wasted shot!

ANSTRUTHER

(Gravely)

It cost us thirty-eight men.

MACLAURIN

(With a nasty contraction of his under lip)

Yes. And more the next day, and the day after. Then they drove us here: bottled us up. And the shooting! Have you ever *seen* such shooting? Somebody has given them maps.

ANSTRUTHER

Yes; that's pretty clear.

MACLAURIN

It was one of our own officers: that's pretty clear also.

ANSTRUTHER

I'm afraid so.

MACLAURIN

Who was it?

ANSTRUTHER

(After a pause)

I will tell you that in fifteen minutes.

MACLAURIN

You mean it?

ANSTRUTHER

(Nodding slowly)

Yes.

THE TRAITOR

MACLAURIN

How I'd love to get my hands around his throat!

ANSTRUTHER

You'll have your chance, Cecil.

MACLAURIN

Do you know the man?

ANSTRUTHER

I think so.

MACLAURIN

What's his name?

ANSTRUTHER

(*Quietly*)

Wait! Wait! . . . I have sent for the officers.

MACLAURIN

(*Dejectedly*)

Then you *don't* know.

ANSTRUTHER

I'm almost sure, Cecil.

ORDERLY

(*Appearing at the entrance of the tent*)

Colonel!

ANSTRUTHER

Yes?

ORDERLY

The officers, sir.

ANSTRUTHER

Ask them to come in, orderly.

(The Orderly salutes and exits.)

MACLAURIN

One of our own officers! What a horrible——

ANSTRUTHER

(Interrupting)

Sh! *(The officers enter, saluting as they do so.)*
Is Lieutenant Edwards there?

GRANTHAM

He's coming, sir.

ANSTRUTHER

Will you sit down, gentlemen? *(He turns to Captain WILLOUGHBY.)* Everything quiet, Captain?

WILLOUGHBY

(Nodding)

Just been the rounds, sir.

(Lieutenant EDWARDS appears. His uniform is torn and soiled, his face haggard, his general appearance that of a man near the end of his strength.)

THE TRAITOR

ANSTRUTHER

Ah, here you are. Come in, Lieutenant.

EDWARDS

I'm sorry if I'm late, sir.

ANSTRUTHER

It's all right. Sit down. (*There is a pause. Then he addresses the assembled officers in a low voice.*) Gentlemen, I have asked you here to lay a matter before you. The Articles of War prescribe certain rules for our conduct. Those rules are supposed to be followed absolutely. But I am violating no secret if I say that under certain circumstances it becomes permissible to—to overlook some of them. Whether we do so or not depends upon your judgment. . . . Lieutenant Edwards, as you know, was captured by the enemy four days ago.

(*There is a general murmur of assent.*)

ANSTRUTHER

Lieutenant Edwards escaped to-day. Lieutenant Edwards told me to-day what took place in the interim. It appears that the Boers wanted information as to the disposition of our forces—as to our strength—as to our plans—information which Lieutenant Edwards could give them.

PARKER

(*To EDWARDS*)

You didn't tell them, did you?

ANSTRUTHER

He refused to speak, Captain Parker. Then . . .
Edwards, tell them what followed.

EDWARDS

They couldn't get anything out of me, so—so they
put me to the torture.

A LIEUTENANT

Good God!

EDWARDS

They held my feet to the fire—they tied a cord
around my forehead——

ANSTRUTHER

(Interrupting coldly)

The details are of no consequence, sir.

EDWARDS

No, sir.

ANSTRUTHER

They tortured you to make you tell. Did you tell?

BATES

You didn't, man!

GRANTHAM

Of course he didn't!

ANSTRUTHER

Did you tell, sir?

EDWARDS

They tortured me, sir, they were killing me——

ANSTRUTHER

(Insistently)

Did you tell?

EDWARDS

(After a tense pause)

Yes, sir.

MACLAURIN

(Rushing at him)

You—you traitor!

ANSTRUTHER

*(Arresting him)*Stop! *(To the others, who have risen.)* Sit down, gentlemen!

EDWARDS

(Sobbing)

I couldn't help it! I swear I couldn't help it! I stood it for ten hours—for ten livelong hours—I fainted twice, and they waited till I came to each time—and then——

MACLAURIN

You told!

EDWARDS

I couldn't stand the pain. It was killing me.

MACLAURIN

You coward!

EDWARDS

(Springing up)

Major!

ANSTRUTHER

(Sternly)

Sit down, sir! *(There is a pause.)* Gentlemen, I have asked you here to judge this man.

PARKER

Why, there's nothing to do but——

ANSTRUTHER

(Interrupting)

Just a minute, Captain. The Articles of War prescribe death. *(There is an affirmatory murmur.)* Lieutenant Edwards has betrayed military secrets. But whether one man dies or does not die is of no great consequence. This is not a court-martial: no report of what takes place here will ever reach the outside world. Lieutenant Edwards was compelled to do what

he did: it was not a voluntary act. He claims—well, it is not necessary for me to repeat what he said: you can imagine what it was. It is for you to decide what is to be done: it is for you to punish—or not to punish. Gentlemen, the matter is in your hands.

(He walks to the door of the tent. The officers rise, and form a group.)

EDWARDS

(Seizing GRANTHAM'S sleeve as he passes.)

Billy!

(GRANTHAM shakes him off in silence.)

A LIEUTENANT

What a thing to happen to the regiment!

EDWARDS

(Turning to him eagerly)

Gerald, if you knew——

THE LIEUTENANT

(Cutting him short)

I don't want to.

(He turns his back.)

MACLAURIN

Gentlemen, as senior officer present I put the question to you——

EDWARDS

But hear me first, fellows——

MACLAURIN

There is nothing you can say, sir. (*He turns to the others.*) The Articles of War prescribe death for the officer who forgets his oath of allegiance to his Sovereign. I so vote. Gentlemen?

(*A chorus of "Ayes"; a single "Nay."*)

MACLAURIN

Again, gentlemen?

(*There is still one "Nay."*)

MACLAURIN

(*Frowning*)

The "ayes" have it.

(*He crosses silently to ANSTRUTHER.*)

EDWARDS

(*Hysterically*)

You're not going to see me killed, are you? Why, I couldn't do anything else——

A LIEUTENANT

Edwards, you were an officer and a gentleman once. Try to remember it.

ANSTRUTHER

(*Returning*)

I believe you have voted, gentlemen?

MACLAURIN

There is only one against, sir.

ANSTRUTHER

(Addressing the officers)

And you are still of the same opinion?

(A general murmur of assent.)

ANSTRUTHER

Major MacLaurin.

MACLAURIN

Yes, sir.

ANSTRUTHER

Some time to-morrow you will go for a walk with Lieutenant Edwards.

MACLAURIN

Yes, sir.

ANSTRUTHER

You will go some distance from camp—not less than a mile, I should say.

MACLAURIN

Yes, sir.

ANSTRUTHER

On this walk there will be an accident. What kind of an accident does not matter. Revolvers have been known to explode while being cleaned. Or, if you prefer, there is a dangerous cliff towards the South. At any rate, there *will* be an accident.

MACLAURIN

Yes, sir.

ANSTRUTHER

From this accident Lieutenant Edwards will not recover. And you will make it your business to see that there *is* such an accident.

MACLAURIN

Yes, sir.

ANSTRUTHER

(To EDWARDS)

You may write what letters you please to-night—under Major MacLaurin's supervision. There is to be nothing which would lead persons to suspect the truth. They will be ordinary letters—such as you might write any time—no farewells. You understand, sir? *(EDWARDS does not answer. He repeats the question.)* You understand, sir?

EDWARDS

(Saluting with an effort)

Yes, sir.

ANSTRUTHER

That is all.

EDWARDS

(Offering his hand)

Good-by, sir.

ANSTRUTHER

(Turning his back)

I said that was all, sir.

CAPTAIN WILLOUGHBY

No, sir, that is not all!

ANSTRUTHER

(Wheeling in surprise)

Sir?

WILLOUGHBY

It is hellish, what you are doing! It's not right, it's not fair, that you should send this poor boy to his death like this! *You* would have done the same thing if you had been in his place! He told, that is true, but you would have told, too! Just look at him: see the mark of the cord around his forehead: imagine what he went through! He did what he had to, and you, you sanctimonious beggars, you would have done no better!

(EDWARDS bursts into an hysterical laugh.)

WILLOUGHBY

(Continuing excitedly)

I was the one who voted against death! You wouldn't hear him, no, you wouldn't listen to a word in his defense. And it's murder that you're doing! Murder! *(He pauses as he notices the peculiar expression on ANSTRUTHER'S face. He finishes weakly):* You must let him go, sir! You must let him go!

ANSTRUTHER

(After a pause, in a grim tone)

Yes.

MACLAURIN

(Voicing a general protest)

What are you doing, Colonel?

ANSTRUTHER

(Silences him with a gesture.)

WILLOUGHBY

You will do what is right, Colonel!

ANSTRUTHER

(Emphatically)

Yes. *(He detains the officers as they start to leave the tent.)* Wait a minute, gentlemen. *(He pauses; then, quietly):* Gentlemen, there has been a traitor amongst you for a long time. I was unable to find out who it was, so Lieutenant Edwards and I put together this story. Lieutenant Edwards was never captured by the enemy: he was never tortured: he never told. But it was sure that one man would be merciful to a traitor: the man who himself might be discovered any day. *(He pauses; then, suddenly):* Captain Willoughby, at dawn a firing squad will escort you out of camp—and shoot you!

CURTAIN

A HOUSE OF CARDS

A PLAY

A HOUSE OF CARDS

*A*N exquisitely furnished room in a fashionable New York apartment house. The walls are hung with tapestries; the furniture, of the period of Louis XIV, though in the best of good taste, is almost oppressively heavy; soft rugs cover the floor. In the center of the room is an extremely simple, yet very massive electrolier.

The room is entered by various doors: one of them, at the rear, leads into a private hall; another, at the right, evidently opens into a room, but the interior of the room is never visible, as the door conceals it from the audience even when open.

The curtain rises. There is no illumination on the stage proper, but the door at the right is open, and a broad beam of light comes through it. Some person is moving about in the next room, and the shadow of a figure is occasionally visible. A clock, somewhere in the distance, strikes midnight in deep tones. Then voices are heard outside at the rear. The unseen figure in the next room moves to the threshold, stands motionless an instant, and as the click of a latchkey is heard, pulls the door shut. The rear door opens, and a man and a woman are seen. The man enters the room boldly; the woman does not advance.

HE

Just wait till I find the switch, dear.

SHE

(Waiting and listening)

You must have passed it.

HE

No. I've got it. *(The electrolier lights, and the woman enters the room. She is not over twenty-five, tall, blond, and insistenty beautiful. She is in evening dress, and her heavy fur cloak, open in front, reveals a décolleté gown. She wears no hat. The man, also in evening dress, is some ten years her senior. His face is not prepossessing, but it conveys an impression of strength, strength mental as well as physical. He moves toward her.)* Let me help you with your cloak.

SHE

(Allowing him to assist her)

Thank you, dear. *(He spreads the cloak over a chair, and proceeds to divest himself of his own overcoat and muffler.)* Quite exemplary. *(Leisurely peeling off her gloves, and glancing at a wrist-watch.)* Just midnight. My watch is fast. *(She sets it.)*

HE

(Turning)

By Jove!

SHE

Yes?

HE

Don't move: stand as you were. With your hands in front of you. No. Yes, that's it! (*He pauses.*) Whew!

SHE

What's the matter?

HE

There's nothing the matter, Helen, absolutely nothing! You are simply exquisite! Perfect!

SHE

(*Smiling*)

Am I?

HE

That gown—and your hair—how that plume sets it off! From your head to your feet, a dream! A dream, Helen!

SHE

(*Dropping the pose*)

Silly boy! (*Crossing to him.*) Do you love me? (*He tries to seize her. She eludes him.*) Say it nicely!

HE

(Following her)

I love you!

SHE

(Backing away)

Again! . . . *(She bumps into a sofa.)* Oh!
(She throws out her hands to balance herself. He catches her; kisses her.)

HE

(After a pause)

Isn't it time to go to bed?

SHE

At midnight? No, it's too early. Besides, I feel like talking.

HE

(Sinking into a chair)

I'm tired.

SHE

I'm not.

HE

You haven't put in a hard day at the office, Helen.

SHE

(With instant sympathy)

Poor dear! *(Sitting on the arm of his chair, and caressing him.)* Was it really so hard?

HE

Yes. . . . You know, I'm an *almost* successful business man. If I had more, I could retire: if I had less, I'd be a failure.—

SHE

(Interrupting)

No, Arthur!

HE

(Continuing)

Oh, I'll never be down and out: I've too much sense for that: but I'll never be able to quit.

SHE

(Kissing his forehead)

I think of you all day long, Arthur.

HE

I know it. But it's work—nothing but work—damned, dull, beastly, monotonous work.

(The door at right opens slowly and gradually. The light in the next room has been extinguished.)

SHE

I thought you loved it.

HE

So did I. I used to think that—once. To-morrow will be another hard day.

SHE

(Reproachfully)

Arthur!

HE

Eh?

SHE

Don't you remember?

HE

Remember?

SHE

To-morrow will be Tommy's birthday!

HE

I forgot all about it. The little rascal!

SHE

He will be two years old to-morrow. Just think of that!

HE

Well, well! *(Suddenly)* I say, he looks like me, doesn't he?

SHE

(Leaning away from him)

Let me look at you.

HE

Oh, you can't deny it! He has my nose. The same hook—not lovely, but mine.

SHE

(Slowly and critically)

I think you're right. But he has my eyes—my lips—my expression—my smile—just like my own pictures when I was his age.

HE

It is a nose that lends character to a face.

SHE

The eyes catch your attention first!

HE

It's the nose that goes down in history!

SHE

(Rising, snapping her fingers)

That for history!

(The door closes quickly and almost noiselessly.)

HE

(Starting up)

What was that?

SHE

What, Arthur?

HE

(Looking about)

I thought I heard something.

SHE

What do you mean?

HE

I would swear to it—I heard a sound.

SHE

(Laughing)

Look! *(She indicates his cigarette case, which has fallen to the floor.)* You dropped your case. *(As he picks it up):* 'Fraid cat! You've been reading about burglars!

HE

(Smiling)

Which of us would be more frightened if we saw one?

SHE

Oh, you don't think there's one here?

HE

(Laughing)

Of course not. *(He lights a cigarette.)* He couldn't get past the elevator man.

SHE

I'm so glad.

HE

(Changing the conversation)

What do you hear from Jimmy?

SHE

Which Jimmy?

HE

Not your brother—Jimmy Duncan, I mean.

SHE

Oh, he's in Chicago.

HE

Coming back this week?

SHE

I don't think so. He's not sure himself.

HE

He writes to you often, doesn't he?

SHE

Yes, quite often. . . . *(She pauses.)* Do you remember, dear, four years ago?

HE

(Puzzled)

Four years ago?

SHE

In January?

HE

(Smiling)

Ah, yes!

SHE

Both of you were attentive to me. If you took me to theater one night, Jimmy took me the next. If you sent me roses, Jimmy sent me orchids. You used to hate each other!

HE

(Laughing)

Funny, wasn't it?

SHE

You didn't think so then. I was afraid, one night—it was at some ridiculous dance——

HE

(Interrupting)

Oh, that was nothing.

SHE

I'm not so sure. . . . I was afraid that you and Jimmy would come to blows. I was glad you didn't.

HE

(With a comic swagger)

I could have whipped him!

SHE

(Shaking her head)

I don't know——

HE

Why, I'm twice as strong as Jimmy—always was.

SHE

It isn't only strength, Arthur.

HE

No? Then it's nerve: Jimmy has no nerve.

SHE

(With a sudden change of tone)

You know, I liked him for that!

HE

Liked him for that?

SHE

Yes.

HE

For being a coward?

SHE

If you want to put it that way, yes. There was something sweet about him. Something gentle, womanly. Not effeminate—Jimmy was never that, but something delicate, something—well, something which I found in very few other men.

HE

(With ill-concealed contempt)

I imagine so.

SHE

Laugh at it if you will. . . . *(She pauses.)* I can't find just the words to express it. Jimmy was the kind of a man who didn't make scenes—not even if he was right. He'd rather give in. I've seen him do it a thousand times, and sometimes—sometimes it hurt me. I felt *he* was not the coward—I, I was the coward. It was so easy to take advantage of him.

HE

(After a pause)

Yes.

(He throws away his cigarette.)

SHE

(In a tone of reverie)

Did I ever tell you—Jimmy and you proposed to me the same week?

HE

(Interested)

No, I didn't know that.

(There is the slightest possible movement of the door, and one notices that it is not closed but ajar: perhaps has been ajar for some time.)

SHE

I thought I had told you: Jimmy asked me on a Monday, and you on a Wednesday.

HE

A Wednesday?

SHE

(Sitting on the sofa)

The twenty-first, wasn't it?

HE

So it was. . . . *(Standing before her, smiling grimly.)* You kept me waiting a week before you put me out of my agony.

SHE

(Smiling)

That was mean, wasn't it?

HE

(Sitting on the floor at her feet)

Yes, it was!

SHE

I kept Jimmy waiting also——

HE

(Interrupting relentlessly)

That was no consolation.

SHE

Poor boy! *(Putting her arm about his neck.)* But you've had your reward, haven't you? *(She leans over and kisses him.)* It wasn't easy to make up my mind—I had a hard time that week.

HE

Thank you!

(At this point one observes that the door is now wide open. The characters have their backs to it, and neither of them notice it.)

SHE

You were a much cleverer man than Jimmy: I had always looked up to you. *(He grunts, but makes no other answer.)* I often wondered what there was in me to make both of you like me: you were so different.

HE

Yes, we were different.

SHE

And Jimmy was such a nice boy.

HE

I was a clever man with no money, and Jimmy a fool with lots of it.

SHE

I thought of that also. I didn't love him, but he used to say that love would come in time: that the love which came last was the best of all.

HE

(Chuckling)

It sounds nice, doesn't it?

SHE

He used to din it into my ears: over and over again.

HE

I wonder if he still thinks so?

SHE

I wonder? *(She pauses.)* And you——

HE

Tell me, was cleverness my only attraction?

SHE

No. (*She looks at him whimsically.*) You were fickle: that was charming—and risky. I knew I would never be sure of you.

HE

I have never been sure of myself.

SHE

I believe you. (*She smiles.*) I never knew how many girls you loved before you met me—and I don't know how many you've loved since.

HE

(*Laughing*)

Helen, that's not fair!

SHE

(*Also laughing*)

But it *is*! Come, 'fess up!

HE

No, no!

SHE

(*Enjoying the situation*)

Oh, but you *must* answer! I insist!

HE

No!

SHE

You know all about me: I don't know anything about you. Answer: whom have you loved *since* you met me?

(She rises with burlesque gestures. The door swings through its arc with a loud squeak: the latch catches, the door refuses to close. Once, twice, the unseen hand partly opens and attempts to close it: then, with a harsh slam, the door is shut, and the bolt of the lock clicks home.)

HE

(Who has risen at the sound of the squeak)

Good God! *(Pushes her towards the telephone.)*
Helen! Quick! Call the police! *(He rushes to the door.)* Who's there? Answer me! Who's there?
(The report of a revolver rings out in the next room.)

HE

(Snarling with rage)

Ah!

(He tries to burst the door open with his shoulder.)

SHE

(At the telephone, hysterical)

Help! Help! Police! Help!

(The lock of the door gives way, and HE disappears into the next room.)

SHE

(Still at the telephone; shrieking to him and to the instrument alternately)

Arthur! Don't go in! Help! Help! Arthur!
Arthur! Where are you? Arthur!

HE

*(Appearing in the doorway, ashen, unnerved,
trembling)*

Helen!

SHE

(Staggering towards him)

What is it? What is it?

HE

(Sobbing with terror)

Helen! Be brave! Be brave! *(He grasps her by the shoulders.)* Jimmy—your husband—overheard. He killed himself!

THE CURTAIN FALLS

PLAYING WITH FIRE
A COMEDY

CHARACTERS

DANNY

MADGE

NORA

PLAYING WITH FIRE

*I*T is about five o'clock of a Sunday afternoon during early summer—just before vacation time, and MADGE and NORA are discovered in a kitchen. NORA evidently belongs there, for she is a buxom, middle-aged "cook-lady." And MADGE is quite as evidently the daughter of the house. She has reached one of the hundred ages through which a girl passes between five and five-and-twenty: the particular age where pigtails are as much in order as a coiffure; where a skirt may reach to the ankles, or only a little below the knees, without calling forth adverse comment; where sodas, and imitation jewelry, and boys, and ambitions to become a trained nurse and sit at the bedside of a blond young Apollo suffering from a pleasantly lingering disease are characteristic; the age, in short, of fifteen years, or thereabouts. She is too old to be called a child: in fact, she would resent it, and she is decidedly too young to be considered a woman. And to her tingling astonishment—and delight—the persons of the opposite sex who are now introduced to her address her as "Miss," instead of the old-time "Madge," and she is correspondingly elated—and dignified—and confused—and self-conscious—and uncomfortable—and altogether happy.

As the curtain rises MADGE is occupied at the kitchen table. NORA, placidly admiring the colored supple-

ment of a Sunday newspaper, is serenely unconscious of her existence, and MADGE, opening the table drawer stealthily, is enabled to satisfy herself that the contents (whatever it may be) is intact. She closes the drawer noiselessly, crosses to the unsuspecting cook, and flings her arms about her.

MADGE

Danny's coming! Danny's coming! (*The cook turns a page with a sympathetic grunt.*) Aren't you glad, Nora?

NORA

Of course I'm glad.

MADGE

Then why don't you say so?

NORA

(*Putting down the paper with a patient smile*)
He was here only yesterday, darlint. An' I've told ye eight times already.

MADGE

Tell me again, Nora.

NORA

(*Resignedly*)

Well, he's a fine little lad, is Danny——

MADGE

(Interrupting)

He's a man, Nora.

NORA

(Accepting the correction)

A man. Straight, an' strong, an'—an' pretty——

MADGE

Handsome.

NORA

Handsome. An'—an'——

(She is running out of adjectives.)

MADGE

Brave.

NORA

Of course he's brave! Why shouldn't he be?

MADGE

(Speaking fondly, after a pause)

He loves me, Nora!

NORA

(Philosophically)

Yes. An' he's putting me out of my own kitchen to tell ye so.

MADGE

You don't mind, do you, Nora?

NORA

(*Thoughtfully*)

Well——

MADGE

(*Indignantly*)

They make fun of us upstairs! Uncle John—and Harry—and Cynthia: Cynthia's the worst! She doesn't say a word: she just sits there and laughs—*laughs!*

NORA

Don't mind her, darlint.

MADGE

I don't! I won't! But I can't help it! (*With crushing contempt.*) Just because she's married! Ugh!

NORA

Never ye mind, dearie, never ye mind! *You'll have the chance to laugh at her some day!*

MADGE

(*Eagerly*)

Do you think so, Nora?

NORA

Honest!

MADGE

Cross your heart?

NORA

(Fervently)

Hope to die! Just think, when you an' Danny come ridin' up in your big automobile, honkin' the horn, an' sittin' there dressed up in furs, an' laces, an' kid gloves, an' paten' leather shoes; *won't* they be mad!

MADGE

(Ecstatically)

Gee!

NORA

An' you'll bow—just like that—(*ducking her head an eighth of an inch*)—an' they'll open the door for ye, an' help ye out——

MADGE

You'll be there, too!

NORA

Why shouldn't I be? But ye won't know me, darlint.

MADGE

How can you say such a thing, Nora? (*She pauses.*) Nora.

NORA

Yes?

MADGE

Tell me about your husband.

NORA

What do ye want to know about him?

MADGE

When did you see him last?

NORA

Well, I was standin' in the door——

MADGE

And he was in the road.

NORA

An' he says, says he——

MADGE

I'm going away for a week, Nora, my dear.

NORA

Them were his very words. An' he took all my money——

MADGE

Three hundred dollars.

NORA

Neither more nor less——

MADGE

And you never saw him again!

NORA

No. Bad luck to him!

MADGE

(In an awe-struck voice)

He married you for your money.

NORA

(Nodding emphatically)

'An' he got it!

MADGE

(Embracing her violently)

You old dear!

NORA

*(Brushing her off good-humoredly)*Ah, g'wan wid ye! So I'm old, am I? *(She rises with ludicrously unreal wrath.)* Old, am I?

MADGE

(Dancing out of her reach, and crossing her fingers)

Fins! Fins, Nora! You can't touch me!

NORA

Can't touch ye, can I?

MADGE

No! (*Touching the cupboard quickly.*) I'm on hunk!

NORA

(*Thoughtfully*)

Well, if you're on hunk . . . (*She seats herself resignedly*) there's nothin' to be done. But look out ye don't leave it!

(*A bell rings loudly.*)

MADGE

Oh, that's Danny! Nora, do I look all right?

NORA

Let me see. (*Patting a stray hair into place.*)
There! There! Now you're fine!

(*The bell rings again.*)

MADGE

Quick, answer the bell, Nora!

NORA

(*Pausing at the door and chuckling hugely*)

Are ye at home to callers, darlint?

MADGE

(With dignity)

To my fiancé only, Nora.

NORA

(Bowing)

Very well, me lady. *(She exits. MADGE, left alone, crosses quickly to the table, and opens the drawer. She closes it again as NORA returns, opens the door, and curtsies in her best manner.)* Step right in, Mr. Blyden.

DANNY

Thank you, Nora. *(He enters. He is a nice-looking, clean-cut boy of MADGE'S age—possibly a few months younger, and he is dressed to kill. He walks carefully, so that nothing will mar the brilliant polish of his shoes, a carnation decorates his button-hole, and he is wearing a stiff white shirt in spite of the sultry weather. A heavy cane, which he swings with elaborate unconcern, is obviously the property of an elder brother. Taken all in all, he is quite a prepossessing young man, and the preternatural air of seriousness which goes with his years is by no means unattractive. He is very much in love, and terrifically in earnest about it: one is apt to be so at his age. And as he catches sight of MADGE he whips off his hat and greets her in a tone which is as genuine as it is self-conscious.)*
Madge!

MADGE

Danny! (*She rushes towards him, to stop and turn reproachfully on the cook.*) Nora!

NORA

Yes, Miss?

MADGE

Haven't you something to attend to—outside?

NORA

(*With a guffaw*)

If I hadn't forgotten all about it!

(*She closes the door on herself with a slam.*)

DANNY

Madge, you're simply beautiful!

MADGE

Oh, Danny!

DANNY

Give us a kiss, Madge!

MADGE

(*Shocked*)

Oh, no.

DANNY

We're engaged.

MADGE

Y—es.

DANNY

I can kiss you all I like.

MADGE

(Shaking her head)

You must wait till we're married.

DANNY

Till we're married?

MADGE

Then you can kiss me.

DANNY

Oh, but it may be months and months! Madge, just one!

MADGE

I oughtn't——

DANNY

(Persuasively)

Close your eyes, Madge.

MADGE

Close my eyes?

DANNY

Like yesterday. Close your eyes, and I'll kiss you when you don't expect it. It's not wrong then.

MADGE

Oh!

DANNY

You see, you don't know when it's coming, and you can't stop me. Come on, Madge.

(She closes her eyes, and throws back her head expectantly. DANNY, about to perform, pauses to wipe his mouth impressively with a silk handkerchief.)

MADGE

(Without opening her eyes)

Why don't you kiss me?

DANNY

(Making a hasty swoop at her lips)

There! *(She opens her eyes.)* Did you like it?

MADGE

Um-humh. *(Virtuously)* I didn't know you were going to kiss me.

DANNY

(Proud of his scheme)

Of course you didn't!

MADGE

Danny: I'm closing my eyes again.

DANNY

(Thirty seconds afterwards)

It's nice in the kitchen, isn't it, Madge?

MADGE

(Snuggling contentedly in his arms)

Um-humh.

DANNY

And, Madge!

MADGE

Yes?

DANNY

Isn't it grand to be in love? Isn't it fine?

MADGE

Is it the first time, Danny?

DANNY

(Truthfully)

Er—no. But it's the first time I really meant it.

MADGE

Are you sure, Danny?

DANNY

(With easy superiority)

You know, I'm not a boy any more. *(He winces at the reminiscence.)* Even though Cynthia makes fun of us. . . . She's mean!

MADGE

No, she isn't.

DANNY

She is!

MADGE

She's not mean, Danny, she doesn't know any better.

DANNY

All right, have it your own way. *(With profound contempt)* Anyhow, she's married.

MADGE

And she has a baby.

DANNY

(Meaningly)

Madge!

MADGE

Danny, you mustn't talk about such things. *(She hides her face on his coat.)* I wonder——

DANNY

(With innermost conviction)

He'll be a boy.

MADGE

No. A girl!

DANNY

I think boys are lots nicer.

MADGE

(Stamping her foot)

Danny, he'll be a girl!

DANNY

(Yielding magnanimously)

Well, suit yourself.

MADGE

*(Radiant)*Thank you, Danny. *(There is a pause.)* Did you know Nora was married?

DANNY

Yes. You told me.

MADGE

(Impressively)

He married her for her money. He took all she had, and ran away with it!

DANNY

She was standing in the door——

MADGE

And he was in the road.

DANNY

And he said, "Nora, my dear——"

MADGE

"I'm going away for a week."

DANNY

And he took all her money——

MADGE

Three hundred dollars. (*Continuing quickly, and stealing DANNY's line.*) And she never saw him again, bad luck to him!

DANNY

What a mean thing to do!

MADGE

It *was* mean, wasn't it? (*She pauses.*) Danny, you wouldn't do such a thing?

DANNY

What do you think? Of course not.

MADGE

Not even if I had *lots* of money? Lots and lots of it?

DANNY

(Smiling)

But you haven't.

MADGE

Oh, I have, Danny!

DANNY

What?

MADGE

Look. *(She produces an envelope from the table drawer, and opens it. Then, with an awed note in her voice.)* Bonds!

DANNY

Are they yours?

MADGE

All mine. Look: here's a green one, and two blue ones—no, three——

DANNY

(Interrupting)

How did you get them?

MADGE

That would be telling.

DANNY

Does your father know it, Madge?

MADGE

(Shakes her head)

Oh, no.

DANNY

*(Horrified)*You *stole* them!

MADGE

No. They're mine. They *belong* to me. And they're worth thousands and thousands of dollars.

DANNY

(Impressed)

Gee!

MADGE

(Putting them back in the drawer)

Father is changing his safe deposit company, so he brought them home over night.

DANNY

(With a mixture of admiration and fear)

And you took them?

MADGE

They're mine, aren't they? Some of them were given to me when I was born, and grandpa left me one, and father bought me some more on my birthday. They've got my name written on them.

DANNY

(Whistling)

You'll catch it when your father finds out.

MADGE

(Shaking her head obstinately)

They *belong* to me, Danny. *(She pauses. Then, rather suddenly)* Danny, do you love me?

DANNY

(Surprised)

Of course I do.

MADGE

Really and truly?

DANNY

Certainly. Why do you ask?

MADGE

And these *(she shows the envelope again)* don't matter?

DANNY
(*Wounded*)

Why, Madge!

MADGE
Answer me.

DANNY
Do you think I care about them?

MADGE
Would you love me just as much if I didn't have them? If I had nothing at all? If I was poor—oh, just as poor as I could be?

DANNY
How can you ask it, Madge?

MADGE
You know, a man married Nora for her money.

DANNY
I'm not that kind, Madge.

MADGE
And the bonds don't make any difference? You wouldn't care if I didn't have them?

DANNY
Of course not. (*And he utters that immortal line which he is destined to repeat to MADGE's many successors.*) I love you for what you are!

MADGE

Then look!

(And, suddenly raising the lid, she pops the envelope into the stove.)

DANNY

(Rushing toward the stove)

Madge!

MADGE

Stop, Danny!

DANNY

(Aghast)

You don't know what you're doing!

MADGE

(Quietly)

Yes, I know.

DANNY

You've gone crazy!

MADGE

(Barring his way abruptly)

Danny, if you love me it doesn't matter!

DANNY

(Stopping as if shot)

So *that's* why!

MADGE

(Turning away calmly)

It's finished now. They're burnt.

DANNY

You fool, oh, you fool!

(He sits dejectedly. There is a long pause.)

MADGE

*(Very earnestly)*I was rich a minute ago. Now I'm poor. Will you marry me *now*, Danny?

DANNY

(Rising and embracing her with intense emotion)

Yes, Madge, yes, a thousand times yes! It doesn't make any difference—not the least difference in the world. I don't care what you have, or what you haven't: I love you, that's all.

MADGE

(Is silent an instant. Then she turns to the table and produces an envelope exactly similar to the first)

Look, Danny.

DANNY

Yes?

MADGE

This envelope.

DANNY

Well?

MADGE

(Insistently)

Look at it.

DANNY

(Dazed)

You didn't burn it?

MADGE

Not this one.

DANNY

What do you mean?

MADGE

This is the envelope I showed you first.

DANNY

Well?

MADGE

The other was a duplicate. The envelope I put in the fire was empty.

DANNY

And the bonds?

MADGE

(Opening the flap of the envelope)

Here.

PLAYING WITH FIRE

DANNY

(In a long-drawn gasp)

Oh!

MADGE

(Rambling on happily)

I knew you loved me, Danny, but I wanted to feel sure—just as sure as could be. And it was so easy to find out. If Nora had only done something like that! If——

DANNY

(Interrupting in a peculiar voice)

Did she suggest it?

MADGE

Oh, no! I thought it all out myself. And it's all right now, Danny, I'm sure *(She put her arms about his neck.)* I'm sure!

DANNY

(Half to himself)

No.

MADGE

(Not noticing)

It didn't take you a second to make up your mind. It was just as I hoped it would be!

DANNY

*(Interrupting)*Madge, it's not all right!

MADGE

Why, Danny!

DANNY

It's wrong, Madge, it's wrong! (*With terrific seriousness*) You didn't *trust* me!

MADGE

Oh, but, Danny——

DANNY

(*Not allowing her to speak*)

If you had trusted me you never could have done such a thing.

MADGE

Burnt them up?

DANNY

No: that wouldn't have been so bad. But you made me *think* you had burnt them up when you hadn't!

MADGE

Oh!

DANNY

If you didn't trust me then, you can't trust me now. You will never trust me. (*He takes up his hat and his enormous walking-stick with colossal dignity.*) Good-by, Madge.

MADGE

(*In agonized appeal*)

Danny!

DANNY

(On the threshold)

You thought I cared more for your money than I did for you——

MADGE

(Seizing his hand)

But I know now, Danny.

DANNY

(Resolutely)

It's too late. *You* cared more for your money than you did for me!

MADGE

You think *that*?

DANNY

Yes.

MADGE

(With a pathetic wail)

Oh, Danny!

DANNY

If you love me—if you're not afraid that I won't take care of you——

(He pauses.)

MADGE

Yes, Danny?

DANNY

You will know what to do—but you won't do it.

MADGE

What do you mean, Danny?

DANNY

(Pointing at the package of bonds)

They don't matter if you trust me: put them in the fire.

MADGE

Oh, Danny!

DANNY

You burnt the empty envelope to test *me*. Now, burn the real envelope to test *yourself*!

MADGE

Do you think I'm afraid?

DANNY

Are you? *(She shakes her head proudly.)* Then come!

(He raises the lid; MADGE, as if hypnotized, crosses to him, and, gazing steadily into his eyes, drops the full envelope on the coals. And DANNY, with a little sigh, gathers her into his arms.)

MADGE

Let them burn, Danny! (*Breaking into sobs, and resting her head on his shoulder.*) Let them burn!

(There is a long pause. Somewheres in the section of the house devoted to the "grown-ups," a clock strikes the half-hour: a single, vibrating note. Somewheres, in the far distance, a deep-throated church bell echoes the announcement. And somewheres, quite close at hand, an industrious student commences to run scales on a tin-pan-ny piano. And DANNY and MADGE are motionless in a long-drawn embrace. And presently they awaken to the situation.)

DANNY

Gemini! When your father finds out! What'll he say?

MADGE

(Softly)

I don't care, Danny.

DANNY

Won't he be mad? Gee, mad won't be the word for it!

MADGE

I'm not afraid, Danny.

DANNY

(Horror-stricken at the thought)

And what'll he do to you?

MADGE

(With a trembling lip)

I suppose he'll drive me out of the house.

DANNY

(Gloomily)

Yes. I s'pose so.

MADGE

(With a confident smile)

But you'll take care of me, Danny!

DANNY

(With immense seriousness)

As long as I live, Madge!

MADGE

(Leading him towards the inner door)

Come.

DANNY

Yes.

MADGE

We'll tell him.

*(And, hand in hand, arms entwined,
trembling, yet unafraid, fearing what is to*

come, but secure in a confidence which nothing, not even Time itself shall be able to shake, they leave the room together.

In the few minutes which have passed they have aged, even though they do not suspect it: they have aged years! They have seen each other's souls naked, and are unashamed. Children they were but a little while ago: children they are still, but it is all mysteriously changed. Something new, something greater than anything of which they have ever dreamed, something great not only to them, but great to all others, has entered into their lives.

And DANNY's sturdy young arm does not quiver about MADGE's waist, and there is a wonderful look in her eyes.

They leave, and as they do so, the cook, an unsuspected eavesdropper, enters the room. She has been crying, for her eyes are red, and she is vigorously mopping them with a corner of her apron. Yet there is a smile on her face as she touches a match to a sheet of paper, crosses slowly to the stove, carefully removes the two uninjured envelopes, and lights the fire.)

THE CURTAIN FALLS

THE FINGER OF GOD

A PLAY

CHARACTERS

STRICKLAND.

BENSON, *his valet.*

A GIRL.

THE FINGER OF GOD

THE living room of STRICKLAND'S apartment. At the rear, a doorway, heavily curtained, leads into another room. At the left of the doorway, a bay window, also heavily curtained, is set into the diagonal wall. Near the center, an ornate writing desk, upon which is a telephone. At the right, the main entrance. The furnishings, in general, are luxurious and costly.

As the curtain rises STRICKLAND, kneeling, is burning papers in a grate near the main door. BENSON, his valet, is packing a suitcase which lies open on the writing desk. It is ten-thirty; a bitterly cold night in winter.

STRICKLAND

Benson!

BENSON

Yes, sir.

STRICKLAND

Close the window: it's cold.

BENSON

(Goes to the window)

The window is closed, sir. It's been closed all evening.

STRICKLAND

(Shivers and buttons his coat tightly)

Benson.

BENSON

Yes, sir?

STRICKLAND

Don't forget a heavy overcoat.

BENSON

I've put it in already, sir.

STRICKLAND

Plenty of fresh linen?

BENSON

Yes, sir.

STRICKLAND

Collars and ties?

BENSON

I've looked out for everything, sir.

STRICKLAND

(After a pause)

You sent off the trunks this afternoon?

BENSON

Yes, sir.

STRICKLAND

You're sure they can't be traced?

BENSON

I had one wagon take them to a vacant lot, and another wagon take them to the station.

STRICKLAND

Good!

BENSON

I checked them through to Chicago. Here are the checks. (*He hands them over.*) What train do we take, sir?

STRICKLAND

I take the midnight. You follow me some time next week. We mustn't be seen leaving town together.

BENSON

How will I find you in Chicago?

STRICKLAND

You won't. You'll take rooms somewheres, and I'll take rooms somewheres else till it's all blown over. When I want you I'll put an ad in the "Tribune."

BENSON

You don't know when that will be, sir?

STRICKLAND

As soon as I think it is safe. It may be two weeks. It may be a couple of months. But you will stay in Chicago till you hear from me one way or the other. You understand?

BENSON

Yes, sir.

STRICKLAND

Have you plenty of money?

BENSON

Not enough to last a couple of months.

STRICKLAND

(Producing a large pocketbook)

How much do you want?

BENSON

Five or six hundred.

STRICKLAND

(Takes out a few bills. Stops)

Wait a minute! I left that much in my bureau drawer.

(He goes toward the door.)

BENSON

Mr. Strickland?

STRICKLAND

Yes?

BENSON

It's the midnight train for Chicago, isn't it?

STRICKLAND

Yes.

(He goes into the next room.)

BENSON

(Waits an instant. Then he lifts the telephone receiver, and speaks very quietly)

Hello. Murray Hill 3500. . . . Hello. This Finley? This is Benson. . . . He's going to take the midnight train for Chicago. Pennsylvania. You had better arrest him at the station. If he once gets to Chicago you'll never find him. And, Finley, you won't forget *me*, will you? . . . I want five thousand dollars for it. Yes, five thousand. That's little enough. He's got almost three hundred thousand on him, and you won't turn in *all* of that to Headquarters. Yes, it's cash. Large bills. (STRICKLAND'S *step is heard.*) Midnight for Chicago.

(BENSON hangs up the receiver and is busy with the suitcase as STRICKLAND enters.)

STRICKLAND

Here's your money, Benson. Count it.

BENSON

(After counting)

Six hundred dollars, thank you, sir. *(He picks up the closed suitcase.)* Shall I go now?

STRICKLAND

No. Wait a minute. *(He goes to the telephone.)*
Hello. Madison Square 7900. . . . Pennsylvania?
I want a stateroom for Chicago, midnight train. Yes,
to-night.

BENSON

Don't give your own name, sir.

STRICKLAND

No. The name is Stevens. . . . Oh, you have one reserved in that name already? Well, this is *Alfred* Stevens. . . . You have it reserved in that name? Then give me another stateroom. . . . What? You haven't any other. *(He pauses in an instant's thought. Then, decisively)*: Never mind, then. Good-by. *(He turns to BENSON.)* Benson, go right down to the Pennsylvania, and get the stateroom that is reserved for Alfred Stevens. You've got to get there before he does. Wait for me at the train gate.

BENSON

Yes, sir.

STRICKLAND

Don't waste any time. I'll see you later.

BENSON

Very well, sir.

(He takes up the suitcase, and goes.)

STRICKLAND

(Left alone, opens drawer after drawer of the desk systematically, dumping what few papers are still left into the fire. Outside a wintry gale whistles, and shakes the locked window. Suddenly there is a knock at the door. He pauses, very much startled. A little wait, and then the knock, a single knock, is repeated. He rises, goes to the door, opens it.)

STRICKLAND

Who's there?

A GIRL

I, sir.

(She enters. She is young: certainly under thirty: perhaps under twenty-five: possibly still younger. A somewhat shabby boa of some dark fur encircles her neck, and makes her pallid face stand out with startling distinctness from beneath a mass of lustrous brown hair. And as she steps over the threshold she gives a little shiver of comfort, for it is cold outside, and her thin shoulders have been shielded from the driving snow by a threadbare coat. She enters

the warm room gratefully, and little rivulets of melted ice trickle to the floor from her inadequate clothing. Her lips are blue. Her hands tremble in their worn white gloves. A seat before a blazing fire, or perhaps, a sip of some strong cordial—this is what she needs. But STRICKLAND has no time for such things. He greets her with a volley of questions.)

STRICKLAND

Who are you?

THE GIRL

Why, don't you remember me, sir?

STRICKLAND

No.

THE GIRL

I'm from the office, sir.

STRICKLAND

The office?

THE GIRL

Your office. I'm one of your personal stenographers, sir.

STRICKLAND

Oh. I suppose I didn't recognize you on account of the hat. What do you want?

THE GIRL

There were some letters which came late this afternoon——

STRICKLAND

(Interrupting harshly)

And you're bothering me with them now? *(He crosses to the door, and holds it open.)* I've got no time. Good night.

THE GIRL

(Timidly)

I thought you'd want to see these letters.

STRICKLAND

Plenty of time to-morrow.

THE GIRL

But you won't be here to-morrow, will you?

STRICKLAND

(Starting violently)

Won't be here? What do you mean?

THE GIRL

You're taking the train to Chicago to-night.

STRICKLAND

How did you know—— *(He stops himself. Then, with forced ease)* Taking a train to Chicago? Of course not! What put that in your head?

THE GIRL

Why, you told me, sir.

STRICKLAND

I told you?

THE GIRL

You said so this afternoon.

STRICKLAND

(Harshly)

I didn't see you this afternoon!

THE GIRL

*(Without contradicting him)*No, sir? *(She produces a time-table.)* Then I found this time-table.*(She holds it out. He snatches it.)*

STRICKLAND

Where did you find it?

THE GIRL

On your desk, sir.

STRICKLAND

On my desk?

THE GIRL

Yes, sir.

STRICKLAND

(Suddenly and directly)

You're lying!

THE GIRL

Why, Mr. Strickland!

STRICKLAND

That time-table never reached my desk! I lost it between the railroad station and my office.

THE GIRL

Did you, sir? But it's the same time-table: you see, you checked the midnight train. *(He looks at her suspiciously.)* I reserved a stateroom for you.

STRICKLAND

(Astonished)

You reserved a stateroom?

THE GIRL

(Smiling)

I knew you'd forget it. You have your head so full of other things. So I telephoned as soon as you left the office.

STRICKLAND

(Biting his lip angrily)

I suppose you made the reservation in my own name?

THE GIRL

No, sir.

STRICKLAND

(Immensely surprised)

What?

THE GIRL

I thought you'd prefer some other name: you didn't want your trip to be known.

STRICKLAND

No, I didn't. *(A good deal startled, he looks at her as if he were about to ask, "How did you know that?" She returns his gaze unflinchingly. The question remains unasked. But a sudden thought strikes him.)*
What name did you give?

THE GIRL

Stevens, sir.

STRICKLAND

(Thunderstruck)

Stevens?

THE GIRL

Alfred Stevens.

STRICKLAND

(Gasping)

What made you choose that name?

THE GIRL

I don't know, sir.

STRICKLAND

You don't *know*?

THE GIRL

No, sir. It was just the first name that popped into my head. I said "Stevens," and when the clerk asked for the first name, I said "Alfred."

STRICKLAND

(*After a pause*)

Have you ever *known* anybody of that name?

THE GIRL

No, sir.

STRICKLAND

(*With curious insistence*)

You are *sure* you never knew anybody of that name?

THE GIRL

How can I be sure? I may have: I don't remember it.

STRICKLAND

(*Abruptly*)

How old are you? (*He gives her no time to answer.*) You're not twenty, are you?

THE GIRL

(Smiling)

Do you think so?

STRICKLAND

(Continuing the current of his thoughts)

And I'm forty-seven. It was more than twenty-five years ago. . . . You couldn't have known.

THE GIRL

(After a pause)

No, sir.

STRICKLAND

(Looking at her with something of fear in his eye)

What is your name?

THE GIRL

Does it matter? You didn't recognize my *face* a few minutes ago: my *name* can't mean much to you. I'm just one of the office force: I'm the girl who answers when you push the button three times. *(She opens a handbag.)* These are the letters I brought with me.

STRICKLAND

(Not offering to take them)

What are they about?

THE GIRL

(Opening the first)

This is from a woman who wants to invest some money.

STRICKLAND

How much?

THE GIRL

Only a thousand dollars.

STRICKLAND

Why didn't you turn it over to the clerks?

THE GIRL

The savings of a lifetime, she writes.

STRICKLAND

What of it?

THE GIRL

She wrote that she had confidence in you. She says that she wants you to invest it for her yourself.

STRICKLAND

You shouldn't have bothered me with that. *(He pauses.)* Did she inclose the money?

THE GIRL

Yes. A certified check.

(She hands it over to him.)

STRICKLAND

(Taking the check, and putting it in his pocketbook)

Write her—oh, you know what to write: that I will give the matter my personal attention.

THE GIRL

Yes, sir. She says she doesn't want a big return on her investment. She wants something that will be perfectly safe, and she knows you will take care of her.

STRICKLAND

Yes. Of course. What else have you?

THE GIRL

A dozen other letters like it.

STRICKLAND

All from old women?

THE GIRL

(Seriously)

Some of them. Here is one from a young man who has saved a little money. He says that when he gets a little more he's going to open a store, and go into business for himself. Here is another from a girl whose father was an ironworker. He was killed accidentally, and she wants you to invest the insurance. Here is another from—but they're all pretty much alike.

STRICKLAND

Why did you bring them here?

THE GIRL

Every one of these letters asks you to do the investing yourself.

STRICKLAND

Oh!

THE GIRL

And you're leaving town tonight. Here are the checks. (*She passes them over.*) Every one of them is made out to you personally; not to the firm.

STRICKLAND

(*After a pause*)

You shouldn't have come here. . . . I haven't time to bother with that sort of thing. Every man who has five dollars to invest asks the head of the firm to attend to it himself. It means nothing. I get hundreds of letters like those.

THE GIRL

Still——

STRICKLAND

What?

THE GIRL

You must do something to deserve such letters or they wouldn't keep on coming in. (*She smiles.*) It's a wonderful thing to inspire such confidence in people?

STRICKLAND

Do you think so?

THE GIRL

It is more than wonderful! It is magnificent! These people don't know you from Adam. Not one in a hundred has seen you: not one in a thousand calls you by your first name. But they've all heard of you: you're as real to them as if you were a member of their family. And what is even more real than you is your reputation! Something in which they rest their absolute confidence: something in which they place their implicit trust!

STRICKLAND

(Slowly)

So you think there are few honest men?

THE GIRL

No: there are many of them. But there is something about you that is different: something in the tone of your voice: something in the way you shake hands: something in the look of your eye, that is reassuring. There is never a doubt—never a question about you. Oh, it's splendid! Simply splendid! *(She pauses.)* What a satisfaction it must be to you to walk along the street and know that everyone you meet must say to himself, "There goes an honest man!" It's been such an inspiration to me!

STRICKLAND

To *you*?

THE GIRL

Oh, I know that I'm just one of the office force to you. You don't even know my name. But you don't imagine that anyone can see you as I have seen you, can work with you as I have worked with you, without there being *some* kind of an effect? You know, in my own troubles——

STRICKLAND

*(Interrupting)*So *you* have troubles?

THE GIRL

You don't pay me a very big salary, and there are others whom I must help. But I'm not complaining. (*She smiles.*) I—I used to be like the other girls. I used to watch the clock. I used to count the hours and the minutes till the day's work was over. But it's different now.

STRICKLAND

(Slowly)

How—different?

THE GIRL

I thought it over, and I made up my mind that it wasn't right to count the minutes you worked for an

honest man. (STRICKLAND *turns away.*) And there is a new pleasure in my work: I do my best—that's all I can do, but *you* do your best, and it's the *least* I can do.

STRICKLAND

(*After a pause*)

Are you sure—I do my best? Are you sure I am an honest man?

THE GIRL

Don't you know it yourself, Mr. Strickland?

STRICKLAND

(*After another pause*)

You remember—a few minutes ago, you spoke the name of Alfred Stevens?

THE GIRL

Yes.

STRICKLAND

Suppose I told you that there once *was* an Alfred Stevens? (*The girl does not answer.*) Suppose I told you that Stevens, whom I knew, stole money—stole it when there was no excuse for it—when he didn't need it. His people had plenty, and they gave him plenty. But the chance came, and he couldn't resist the temptation. . . . He was eighteen years old then.

THE GIRL

(Gently)

Only a boy.

STRICKLAND

Only a boy, yes, but he had the dishonest streak in him! Other boys passed by the same opportunity. Stevens didn't even know what to do with the money when he had stolen it. They caught him in less than twenty-four hours. It was almost funny.

THE GIRL

He was punished.

STRICKLAND

(Nodding)

He served a year in jail. God! What a year! His folks wouldn't do a thing for him: they said such a thing had never happened in the family. And they let him take the consequences. *(He pauses.)* When he got out—*(stopping to correct himself)*—when he was *let* out, his family offered him help. But he was too proud to accept the help: it hadn't been offered when he needed it most. He told his family that he never wanted to see them again. He changed his name so they couldn't find him. He left his home town. He came here.

THE GIRL

And he has been honest ever since!

STRICKLAND

Ever since: for twenty-eight years! It was hard at times, terribly hard! In the beginning, when he had to go hungry and cold, when he saw other men riding around in carriages, he wondered if he hadn't made a mistake. He had knocked about a good deal; he had learnt a lot, and he wouldn't have been caught so easily the second time. It was *almost* worth taking the chance! It was *almost* worth getting a foot of lead pipe, and waiting in some dark street, waiting, waiting for some sleek *honest* man with his pockets full of money! It would have been so simple! And he knew *how*! I don't know why he didn't do it.

THE GIRL

Tell me more.

STRICKLAND

He managed to live. It wasn't pleasant living: it wasn't even decent living. But he stayed alive! I don't like to think of what he did to stay alive: it was humiliating; it was shameful, because he hadn't been brought up to do that kind of thing, but it was honest. Honest, and when he walked home from his work at six o'clock, walked home to save the nickel, his betters never crowded him because they didn't want to soil their clothes with his *honest* dirt! He had thought the year in jail was terrible. The first year he was free was worse. He had never been hungry in jail.

THE GIRL

Then his chance came.

STRICKLAND

Yes, it *was* a chance. He found a purse in the gutter, and he returned it to the owner before he had made up his mind whether to keep it or not. So they said he was honest! He knew he wasn't! He knew that he had returned it because there was so much money in it that he was afraid to keep it, but he never told them that. And when the man who owned the purse gave him a job, he worked—worked because he was afraid not to work—worked so that he wouldn't have any time to think, because he knew that if he began to think, he would begin to steal! Then they said he was a hard worker, and they promoted him: they made him manager. That gave him more chances to steal, but there were so many men watching him, so many men anxious for him to make a slip so that they might climb over him, that he didn't dare.

(*He pauses.*)

THE GIRL

'And then?

STRICKLAND

The rest was easy. Nothing succeeds like a good reputation, and he didn't steal because he knew they'd catch him. (*He pauses again.*) But he wasn't honest at bottom! The rotten streak was still there! After

twenty-eight years things began to be bad. He speculated: lost all the money he could call his own, and he made up his mind to take other money that *wasn't* his own, all he could lay his hands on, and run off with it! It was wrong! It was the work of a lifetime gone to hell! But it was the rottenness in him coming to the surface! It was the thief he thought dead coming to life again!

THE GIRL

(*After a pause*)

What a pity!

STRICKLAND

He had been honest so long—he had made other people think that he was honest so long, that he had made *himself* think that he was honest!

THE GIRL

Was he wrong, Mr. Strickland?

STRICKLAND

(*Looking into her eyes; very quietly*)

Stevens, please. (*There is a long pause.*) I don't know what sent you: who sent you: but you've come here to-night as I am running away. You're too late. You can't stop me. Not even the finger of God Himself could stop me! I've gone too far. (*He goes on in a voice which is low, but terrible in its earnestness.*) Here is money! (*He pulls out his pocketbook.*) Hundreds of thousands of it, not a cent of it mine!

And I'm stealing it, do you understand me? *Stealing it!* To-morrow the firm will be bankrupt, and there'll be a reward out for me. (*He smiles grimly, and bows.*) Here, if you please, is your honest man! What have you to say to him?

THE GIRL

(*Very quietly*)

The man who has been honest so long that he has made *himself* think that he is honest *can't* steal!

STRICKLAND

(*Hoarsely*)

You believe *that*?

THE GIRL

(*Opening her bag again*)

I was left a little money this week: only a few hundred dollars, hardly enough to bother you with. Will you take care of it for me—Alfred Stevens?

STRICKLAND

Good God!

(*And utterly unnerved he collapses to a chair. There is a long pause.*)

THE GIRL

(*Crossing slowly to the window, and drawing aside the curtain*)

Look! What a beautiful night! The thousands of sleeping houses! The millions of shining stars!

And the lights beneath! And in the distance, how the stars and the lights meet! So that one cannot say: "Here Gods ends; Here Man begins."

(The telephone rings, harshly, and shrilly. STRICKLAND goes to the receiver.)

STRICKLAND

(Quietly)

Yes? . . . You're afraid I'm going to miss the train? . . . Yes? Well, I'm *going* to miss the train! . . . I'm going to stay and face the music! *(Hysterically.)* I'm an honest man, d'ye hear me? I'm an honest man. *(And furiously, he pitches the telephone to the floor, and stands panting, shivering, on the spot. From the window a soft radiance beckons, and trembling in every limb, putting out his hands as if to ward off some unseen obstacle, he moves there slowly.)* Did you hear what I told him? I'm going to make good. I'm going to face the music! Because I'm an honest man! An honest man!

(He gasps, stops abruptly, and in a sudden panic-stricken movement, tears the curtains down. The window is closed—has never been opened—but the girl has vanished. And as STRICKLAND, burying his face in his hands, drops to his knees in awe,

THE CURTAIN FALLS

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